

Senior Thesis FAQ – Student Questions

“What bibliographical format am I required to use?”

Long ago, there once was a central requirement that all theses be formatted according to the Turabian system. It’s been years since this requirement was in place, yet still somehow it persists in the student culture. *There is no universal requirement for the bibliographical format of a thesis.* Rather, individual thesis readers among the various disciplines individually require their students to use whatever formatting strategy seems appropriate.

Generally, faculty in the humanities will prefer MLA, psychology wants APA, and the social sciences want Chicago or Turabian. However, this is not universally true. Individual professors can be idiosyncratic in their preferences, so *the best advice for thesis writers is that they should ask their readers.* In the rare case that a student comes in looking for a suggested format, and saying that his/her reader has deliberately abdicated this responsibility, we generally recommend MLA, just because it’s easier than most of the competing formats.

“What are the formatting requirements for a senior thesis?”

At present, the Writing Center has no formal requirements for thesis formatting, nor does it have any authority to lay down such requirements. The only relationship of the Writing Center to the senior thesis requirement is that we’re willing to help anyone who asks.

That said, there are some formatting requirements laid down by the Registrar, and the Center does help students to meet those requirements insofar as we are able. All theses must display a cover page of standardized format. An example of this format is available in the Writing Center, among the handouts near the computers. There are also specific requirements for the margins of a thesis, which are necessary for the binding process. A handout in the Writing Center, as well as at the Writing Center website, describes these as well.

All theses must be bound in the same way – clear front cover, black rear cover, with a plastic pressure binding on the spine. Very large theses may be spiral bound, but students thinking about this option should check with the Registrar to make sure their thesis is long enough to qualify. Examples of bound theses may be found in the Crocker reading room, located in Bauer Center North.

“I’m doing a creative thesis. What are my writing requirements?”

Students completing their thesis requirement through a creative work are often required to submit a written component along with the creative piece. Generally this written component will be of term paper length, though the specific details of this requirement are worked out between the student and his/her reader.

Because these smaller written thesis elements are purely driven by the demands of the reader, the Writing Center consultants cannot offer standardized advice for their formatting and content. Rather, students should poll their readers for these requirements, then relay them to the tutorial staff. It’s then the Center’s job to help you meet those requirements as best we can.

“How am I supposed to organize this massive, beastly paper?”

The senior thesis is almost always the largest, most complex writing assignment a college senior has ever faced: this can be daunting in prospect. The best advice we can give a student who faces this task is to consider the thesis not as a monolith, but as a series of chapters, each the length of a term paper. While this doesn't make the task any less arduous, it does make it more manageable; breaking the project into smaller pieces is somewhat less staggering to the intellect.

This approach also offers a second virtue: it forces students to think carefully about the organizational structure of the thesis argument before composition gets underway. This is an effect perhaps more critical than the mental ease which a chapter-based strategy provides: any thesis author who isn't thinking carefully about structure at the outset of the work is likely to encounter serious difficulties of composition later on.

Finally, a chapter-based strategy is also helpful to consultants, since it suggests manageable “chunks” which may fit into a single tutorial session.

“How long can I stay at the Writing Center?”

Thesis students are encouraged to schedule hour-long appointments, preferably in some quantity, on a long-term schedule when possible. When you first come in seeking help, it's often a good idea (at some strategic point during the first session) to lay out several hour-long appointments in advance, putting a schedule in place. This is also nice, in that it gives our staff a chance to keep a thesis student in the hands of a single tutor – this is much more efficient, since it saves hours of re-reading.

If you are thinking about requesting an even longer session, carefully evaluate the situation. Do you really have the time (and remaining patience) to go past an hour? Are you likely to be able to retain anything you discuss after the first hour? Bear in mind that it's often better to return to your dorm, finish one hour's worth of revisions, then start up again at a later date on the next hour's worth. Obviously this strategy is less and less possible as a deadline approaches.

You may, as always, avail yourself of our comfortable study lounge, should you so choose. One virtue of spending time in the Writing Center is that it can offer you a space (relatively) free of distraction. You may also find that, during “down” time, consultants may be able to give you insights regarding your work in progress.

“Who's a good reader?”

We really can't answer this question. You must determine which reader would complement your style and your chosen topic. Think carefully about which reader would best help you meet the challenges of this assignment. Writing Center consultants are happy to share their knowledge of the research interests and academic specializations of faculty members, to comment on pet peeves of different readers, and to discuss the different management styles various readers prefer when working with students. It's important to note, however, that this sort of assistance will avoid value judgments – there's a degree of professionalism to be maintained, here.